

In Phila. schools, everything new is old

By William C. Kashatus

On the brink of insolvency, Philadelphia's School Reform Commission is proposing a "portfolio management" plan that calls for slashing the district's central office, closing dozens of traditional public schools, and expanding charters. It's a way of handing more schools over to private operators.

There's nothing new about such privatization efforts in Philadelphia's schools. In fact, they go back to the district's establishment in 1818.

Hoping to stem the tide of juvenile delinquency among Philadelphia's growing number of poor and working-class children, Roberts Vaux, a Quaker philanthropist, led a group of "public-minded citizens" who established a common school system to improve literacy and morals. These early public schools were essentially charity institutions, governed by a volunteer Board of Controllers who hailed from the ranks of the city's large-scale merchants and independently wealthy gentlemen.

Operating with scrupulous financial efficiency, the controllers employed the "monitorial" system of Joseph Lancaster, a prominent British education reformer. Lancaster's pedagogy was well regarded in the early 19th century for its efficient use of older student monitors to teach younger, less advanced students. It enabled a small number of adult masters to educate large numbers of students very cheaply.

As many as 400 students of various ages were gathered into very large rooms and then divided into classes of 10 to 12. A master teacher instructed the monitors, who in turn taught younger pupils. While grouped into classes, students were evaluated and promoted individually.

Initially, the monitorial system proved to be an inexpen-

sive way of making primary education more inclusive. As a result, the School District expanded from 10 schools, 10 master teachers, and 2,845 students in 1818 to 16 schools, 31 master teachers, and 6,767 students by 1831.

But quantity was not matched by quality. Philadelphia's public schools suffered from the stigma of pauperism. With a student-teacher ratio of 218-to-1 and costs amounting to a meager \$4 per pupil, the education was generally subpar. Juvenile delinquency in the city continued to rise throughout the 1820s and early '30s, and children from wealthy and middle-class families continued to attend private academies. Sound familiar?

It wasn't until 1836, after Pennsylvania's Free School Law created a tax-supported system open to the children of both rich and poor, that Philadelphia abandoned the monitorial system and grouped students by age, with lower student-teacher ratios. That paved the way for standardization and supervision, and quality rose dramatically. In addition, Philadelphia gained a virtual monopoly over state education money, as other cities and towns could not equal its enrollment or organization.

Privatization fads have come and gone throughout the long, troubled history of education reform. Philadelphia's last such experiment took place just 10 years ago, when the state created the School Reform Commission and handed dozens of schools over to corporations, nonprofits, and universities. In the end, there was no measurable improvement in academic performance.

There are no financial shortcuts to high-quality education. If the city continues to repackage such panaceas, its children will continue to suffer.

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